DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 449 281 UD 033 969

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TITLE	Given the Nature of Family Centers, How Can We Craft a Meaningful Evaluation?
INSTITUTION	Center for Assessment and Policy Development, Bala Cynwyd, PA.
PUB DATE	2000-02-00
NOTE	10p.
PUB TYPE	Reports - Descriptive (141)
EDRS PRICE	MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS	*Family Involvement; *Family Needs; *Program Evaluation
IDENTIFIERS	*Family Resource and Support Programs

ABSTRACT

Many communities have family centers, though there is no one definition of what a family center is. Family centers provide families with preventive supports which encourage them to engage actively in building on their own strengths, setting their own goals for change, and managing their own use of available formal services. Family centers are oriented to the family as a whole unit and its individual members as whole persons. Family centers challenge traditional program evaluation methods. This paper addresses several questions about the evaluation of family centers, including: "What assumptions about participation and outcomes underlie most program evaluation strategies?"; "What is the special nature of family center work?"; "What is known about how families change?"; "What is known about family participation in family centers?"; "What can be expected about the relationship between family center participation and family change?"; "How should evaluations be designed to fully capture the individual, community, and system effects or benefits of family centers?"; and "What is necessary to ensure that family centers can effectively take part in evaluation?" References to examples of family center evaluations by the Center for Assessment and Policy Development are provided. (SM)

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ED 449 281

GIVEN THE NATURE OF FAMILY CENTERS, HOW CAN WE CRAFT A MEANINGFUL EVALUATION?

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February 2000

Center for Assessment and Policy Development

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GIVEN THE NATURE OF FAMILY CENTERS, HOW CAN WE CRAFT A MEANINGFUL EVALUATION?

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FEBRUARY 2000

Many communities have family centers, yet there is no one definition or description of what a "family center" is. A family center can be a place and a method to engage at-risk families in activities and supports that prevent negative outcomes (such as unwanted pregnancies, child abuse or neglect, family dysfunction). It can be a place to offer families information about, referrals to, or even the opportunity to apply for public and private services and benefits. A family center can offer its own specific programs and services (such as education and training programs, parenting and child development classes, nutrition services, etc.), usually surrounded with additional supports and services for individuals and families. A center can also offer families in a neighborhood or community space for informal socializing and network building, a base for community organizing, and an opportunity to identify and make use of the talents, skills and energy of residents.

Planning and operating a family center may engage the broader community in developing a range of strategies to address the needs and goals of families. A family center may then provide a way to fill in gaps in a desired continuum of prevention services for families, by using resources in more flexible, less categorical, less deficit-driven ways. A family center may be linked with community and service system stakeholders as a means of identifying, from the ground up, barriers, issues, and opportunities for change that could affect the well-being of children and families throughout the community.

At their broadest, family centers are all these things. They are a strategy to provide families with preventive supports in ways that encourage them to engage actively in building on their unique strengths, setting their own goals for change, and managing their own use of available formal services. This strategy is generally intended to reach a wide diversity of families with the goal of providing them with what they need to function well, either directly or through links with community resources. As a prevention strategy, centers are expected to help families avoid crises when possible, assist families in rebounding from crises more quickly when they cannot be avoided, and work toward positive growth and development for all family members.

Family centers embody the "new way of doing business" in the practice of working with families. They are oriented to the family as a whole unit and its individual members as whole persons; they presume that families bring values and strengths with them and organize their activities to draw upon these resources; they are responsive to and foster family leadership; they act as a hub for linking community residents, groups and institutions in ways that reflect local assets, wants and needs; they see their job as assisting families rather than "fixing" them.

Investment in family centers, as with any other commitment of scarce resources, is subject to scrutiny. What does this investment "buy?" Do centers offer what families want and need in ways that reach and

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engage them? Do centers work with, strengthen and build community leadership and organizational capacities? Do they help shape system policy to reflect family support principles and practice? And, even more importantly, what does this investment "produce" in terms of intended social goods? Are families and their members better off because of their involvement with family centers? Are communities better places for children and families to live and grow? Are service delivery systems more responsive and effective?

These important questions are often posed in the evaluation of family centers. Yet, family centers, by their very nature, challenge traditional program evaluation methods.

WHAT ASSUMPTIONS ABOUT PARTICIPATION AND OUTCOMES UNDERLIE MOST PROGRAM EVALUATION STRATEGIES?

Most "programs" intend to change the behavior, experiences, life circumstances, etc. of individual participants - those who receive the program's services. Programs designed to serve children, families or both often have specific behaviors, characteristics or experiences they hope to help change - things to do with health, child development, family stability and functioning, school success, employment and economic self-sufficiency. The programs often attempt to make those changes by filling a need, solving a problem, remedying a deficit among the participants.

Thus, programs offer a definable relatively standard intervention (set of services, benefits, supports, activities) available to participants. This intervention has an expected relationship with the intended outcomes. Participation in the intervention is necessary for the intended benefits to be achieved. Higher levels of participation or receipt of services (or meeting a minimal level of participation or receipt of services) are expected to be associated with higher levels of outcomes.

Using a traditional evaluation approach, family centers are expected to affect outcomes by providing services or supports for participating individuals and families. However, family center work goes considerably beyond direct work with individuals and families.

WHAT IS THE SPECIAL NATURE OF FAMILY CENTER WORK?

Family centers want to help families make changes similar to those of other social service, health or education programs - but with a different approach and a broader agenda.

- Family centers see their job as strengthening all families in the community - not just participating families.
- Family centers go about strengthening families not only by offering specific services, programs or activities - but also by helping to build community capacity to support families in various formal and informal ways.
- Family centers also strengthen families by working to make changes in policies and practices that, often inadvertently, weaken families and communities.

Regardless of the specific activities they engage in, family centers look for opportunities to:

- implement programs and services well (Program Development);
- develop the necessary resources to carry out these activities and to build capacity to continue and strengthen these and related activities (Resource Development);
- build community capacity to strengthen and support children and families, through work with other institutions, organizations, agencies and groups in the neighborhood (Community Development); and

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- influence policies and practices of other institutions, organizations and agencies in their work with children and families so that positive outcomes are more likely (Policy Development).

The programs and services of family centers are critical for many reasons:

- Obviously, they are intended to provide direct benefits for the children and families who participate.
- They build credibility and legitimacy within the community and with the formal service system for the community capacity building and system change aspects of the center's work.
- They provide opportunities to "walk the walk" in terms of mobilizing and responding to community concerns and desires and promoting parent leadership.
- They can be the training ground for modeling and teaching new front line practice strategies to staff and management in other agencies and organizations.
- They can be the catalyst for innovative and collaborative program development and implementation within the community.

At the same time, programs and services geared to work with individuals - while critical - are not necessarily the most important way in which centers can benefit children and families in the community. This is true partly because of the scope and size of family centers, and partly because of the nature of family change.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT HOW FAMILIES CHANGE?

There are many areas of growth and change that families seek and that social interventions attempt to assist them to make. These include:

- Being able to provide adequately for one's family;
- Mature decision making for oneself and one's children;
- Knowing how to use available community resources, both formal and informal, effectively;
- Making valuable contributions to one's own community;
- Having strong parenting skills; and
- Supporting children for healthy development, school readiness and school success.

Growth and change in families are not necessarily linear. Some families are ready to set ambitious goals for themselves, while others need to see a series of small successes that build their confidence. Most families experience ups and downs in their lives, even as they work toward greater stability, independence and well-being. Many are vulnerable to setbacks, some temporary and some longer term, associated with particular events, such as an illness, eviction from their home, or change in household structure or dynamics. Others are buffeted by the day-to-day stresses of poverty, family conflict, or community violence. Thus, what appear to be small changes in the short term may, for some families, represent important breakthroughs with long-term positive benefits. Further, not all change, especially in the short term, can be expected to be in a consistently positive direction.

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Given the nature of family change, family centers may play an important role in the lives of individual families, particularly at critical points. However, it seems likely that sustained and widespread change for families needs broader support than the types of programs and services that may be offered at family centers. This is especially true given the typical patterns of family participation in centers.

WHAT DO WE KNOW ABOUT FAMILY PARTICIPATION IN FAMILY CENTERS?

When participation patterns at family centers are analyzed it becomes clear that most do not serve large numbers of families at any given time, compared to the total number of families in the community. This is not surprising, given most centers' physical size, number of staff, funding levels, and other resources. Further, a large proportion of families participate at low intensity for short periods of time.

Families come to family centers for many different reasons and participate in different ways. Some enroll in formal programs and attend these regularly; other register for these programs, find that regular attendance is not possible, but still come to centers on a periodic basis. Some families come to centers to solve a particular problem or obtain a specific piece of information - sometimes all it takes to meet their needs is a referral, a brief informal counseling session, or a chance to sit down with other parents and talk it through. Other families want a chance for regular contact with other parents as a break from their physical or social isolation; others see centers as a way to find out more about how to be a good parent. Sometimes families participate in a regular class or support group, sometimes they just drop in every once in a while.

Further, there is diversity among the many families who participate infrequently or use only a few of the available services and supports. Some families need only a boost from the family center (a referral or help through a crisis) - they do not participate intensively and do not change their behaviors or attitudes based on contact with the center. Some families come primarily for the social activities. Some families are not ready to participate in family centers. While they may desire to make changes in their lives, these families may not be at a point where family centers are appropriate for them. Still other families move away and cannot participate in the center.

Clearly, families who come to family centers differ in what they want and need. Family centers are designed to help each individual family take advantage of an array of programs, activities, services and supports to reach for its own goals. Based on the reasons they come, how they participate and the characteristics and history they bring with them, families can be expected to benefit from their contact with family centers in different ways.

WHAT CAN WE EXPECT ABOUT THE RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN FAMILY CENTER PARTICIPATION AND FAMILY CHANGE?

It is important to put expectations for how family centers might help individual families into perspective with what we know about the successes of other programmatic efforts. Evaluations of other interventions that are more tightly targeted in the individuals they serve, more concentrated in the services or programs they provide, and more focused on specific outcomes expected often do not show large impacts for participants in many areas of family, child and adult behavior and functioning. These results suggest that it is unrealistic to expect to observe substantial long-term effects for family center participants, given the

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strength and focus of the centers' programs and services, the complexities of the behaviors that are the focus of family center programs, and the wide range of other factors likely to influence those behaviors.

The realities about how families typically participate in family centers and about how families change suggest several critical lessons for family center evaluations:

- Families can effectively use family centers in different ways, depending on what they want and need, with the benefits they seek and expect being correspondingly large or small;
- Families' readiness to take the next steps toward change is a major factor in any program's success, including that of family centers;
- There is not necessarily a linear relationship between intensity and duration of participation at family centers and changes in child and parent outcomes - that is, children and families can benefit from short-term or occasional contact with centers as well as from longer-term or regular contact;
- Helping families, and their children, thrive is a long-term proposition that is a community rather than program or center responsibility;
- Programs and services delivered through or at family centers are only one of many ways in which families can get their needs met and move toward their goals for change; and
- Family centers' work on community capacity building and system change can potentially affect many more families in more sustained and comprehensive ways than their programmatic activities.

Family centers respond to the realities of family change by offering an array of services and supports open on a voluntary basis to diverse families; by meeting the needs of individual families in a holistic way and by being responsive to specific community desires; and by working collaboratively within their community to build broader capacities to support and assist families and with service systems and providers to help them become more family- and community-oriented.

HOW SHOULD EVALUATIONS BE DESIGNED TO FULLY CAPTURE THE INDIVIDUAL, COMMUNITY AND SYSTEM EFFECTS OR BENEFITS OF FAMILY CENTERS?

For the reasons reviewed above, a substantial part of family centers' impacts is likely to come through its efforts to strengthen community capacities and system responsiveness. Effective family center work includes acting as a catalyst for changes in how families are empowered to act on their own behalf, in how community providers are organized and work together, and in how systems respond to family and community needs and goals. This suggests that family center evaluations must give proportionate attention to documenting and assessing the implementation and outcomes of all aspects of centers' work in order to have a complete picture of benefits.

It is also important to remember that family center work at all levels, including in the delivery of programs and services, is dynamic and evolving. At their best, family centers are responsive and opportunistic, taking advantage of both opportunities and challenges. A linear (flowchart) model, even with feedback loops, may not fully capture the spontaneous nature of the learnings and connections that come from each family center activity. Perhaps a better analogy is a "family tree" - where any particular family center activity can grow a large number of "branch" efforts, as these are suggested by what is learned as each activity is carried out. So, a program to encourage early registration for kindergarten or preschool may include policy evolving into an effort to support regular attendance among those who register, which may expand to include neighborhood crime watch programs to deal with safety issues affecting children

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walking to school and local collaborations with community organizations offering children's clothing exchanges so that the onset of cold weather does not precipitate a drop-off in attendance. This suggests that evaluation design and implementation should be responsive to the evolution of family center work so that it works against appropriate markers of progress and outcome measures. Further, its value will be greatly enhanced if designed to provide appropriate feedback at critical points to help inform the change process.

Given these considerations, family center evaluations need to identify:

- the dimensions of family development or change or family outcomes the center is expected to affect;
- what families need/want in order to change and the other conditions or experiences that are likely to affect family change;
- whether the expected effects on family change or improved outcomes will come about through the direct contact with the center or through the center's community building or system change work;
- the specific steps toward change the center's programs or services are intended to assist individual families in making and level of family involvement or participation necessary to take those steps;
- changes in the community and service system that are needed to support center program effects for participating families; and
- changes in the community and service system that would provide more opportunities for families to benefit from other holistic, prevention-oriented, family-focused, strength-based services and supports.

Evaluations of family centers should consider focusing at multiple levels in order to examine the multiple ways in which they might ultimately affect the well-being of children and families:

- program evaluation
  - how well specific programs, activities and services are actually implemented at the family center;
  - how program implementation is linked to resource, community and policy development activities of the center;
  - the results of family/participant recruitment and engagement
  - program participation patterns; and
  - program benefits for participating families.
- center evaluation
  - how well the center as a whole (or the network of family centers) implements family support best practice through its programs and activities;
  - how the center (or the network) implements work related to community capacity building and system change;
  - total numbers of families and individual family members recruited and engaged;
  - how families participate in center activities in multiple ways and/or over time; and
  - how participating families benefit from the various ways in which they use the center.
- community evaluation
  - changes in community capacity and system responsiveness that are expected from family center activities;

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- changes in families' experiences within their communities and with the formal service system; and
- changes in indicators of child and family well-being at the neighborhood and city levels on a timberline that is congruent with the community and system changes.

Further, family center evaluations should consider what it takes to ensure that family center staff, governing boards, participating families and other key stakeholders can engage in and benefit from the evaluation.

WHAT IS NECESSARY TO ENSURE THAT FAMILY CENTERS CAN EFFECTIVELY TAKE PART IN EVALUATION?

Effective participation in evaluation means that family centers themselves (staff, boards, member families, community partner agencies, and other key stakeholders) have the necessary capacities to help inform, contribute to and use information from evaluation activities. This requires that family centers as an organization and as a change agent operate from an outcomes orientation. There needs to be an explicit understanding among program and management staff, and shared by funders and those setting policies affecting the centers, about the what and how of the outcomes expected to be affected by family centers. What about children and families, communities, and systems are family centers expected to help change? How is the specific work of family centers expected to contribute toward these changes? What else needs to happen for these changes to take place? And, are the strategies used by family centers sufficient in scope, scale, intensity and quality to have the kinds of effects that are expected?

Making these assumptions explicit - through what has been variously called "models of change," "theories of change," or "logic models" - will identify reasonable expectations and specific markers of progress, interim results, and long-term outcome goals to guide evaluation or self-assessment activities. This work will also help centers identify areas where their work needs to be strengthened in order to meet those targets.

Finally, once the markers of progress and results or outcomes indicators have been identified, family centers need to have the capacity to build regular data collection into their routine operations. Further, feedback using these data, even if compiled by an external organization (such as central administrative office or an external evaluator), needs to be provided to centers in formats and with the necessary training and technical assistance to make them usable and useful. Data-driven reflection is critical to sustaining an outcomes-orientation to the work of family centers and to helping them maintain their responsiveness to families and community.

For examples of CAPD's family center evaluations, please refer to:

"The Results-Oriented Evaluation of Maryland's Family Support Centers: Final Report." Bala Cynwyd, PA: Center for Assessment and Policy Development, May 1998 (S. A. Stephens with Salvatore Saporito, Maria Boccuti and Bonita Stowell)

"Evaluation of the PAT Home Visiting Program: Final Report". Bala Cynwyd, PA: Center for Assessment and Policy Development, April 6, 1998 (Peter York and S. A. Stephens with Maria Boccuti, Salvatore Saporito, Bonita Stowell and Raj Thadani).

"Learnings from the 1996-97 Outcome-Based Initiatives of the Philadelphia Family Centers: A Reflection on the Work." Bala Cynwyd, PA: Center for Assessment and Policy Development, March 1998 (Davido Dupree, Emmett Gill and S. A. Stephens).

For more information about CAPD's work with family centers, including strategic planning and technical assistance as well as evaluation, please contact Davido Dupree (ddupree@capd.org) or S. A. Stephens (sstephens@capd.org).

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See the following for other information on family centers and family center evaluations:

"How Are We Doing? A Program Self-Assessment Toolkit for the Family Support Field." Chicago, IL: Family Resource Coalition of America, 1998 (Nilofer Ahsan and Lina Cramer).

"Connections: A Dialogue on Evaluation." Iowa City, IA: National Resource Center for Family Centered Practice and Chicago, IL: Family Resource Coalition of America, 1997.

Family Resource Coalition of America, 20 N. Wacker Drive, Suite 1100, Chicago, IL 60606; voice: 312-338-0900, fax: 312-3381522; www.frca.org

"Review of Research on Supportive Interventions for Children and Families." Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates, Inc., February 1996 (Helen V. Barnes, Barbara D. Goodson, and Jean I Layzer).

"Evaluation of Six Family-Support Programs: Are They Effective?" Families in Society: The Journal of Contemporary Human Services, March-April 1998, pp. 134-148.

"Way To Grow: Implementing an Outcome-Based Approach to Evaluating a Family Support Program." Iowa City, IA: Child and Family Policy Center, November 1995 (Charles Bruner with Mike Crawford, Victor Elias, and Karon Perlowski).

"Changing What Counts: Re-thinking the Journey Out of Welfare." Chicago, IL: Project Match, Erikson Institute, April 1991 (Toby Herr and Robert Halpern with Aimee Conrad).

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